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A NEW LIGHT ON THE SONNETS

Sitting in the old-fashioned garden which takes the place of Shakespeare's last home in Stratford, I was running through a volume of the Sonnets which I had just bought of the bookseller now established in the house where Judith Shakespeare went to live after her marriage. I came to the line, "So I, made lame by fortune's dearest spite," in the thirty-seventh sonnet. A thought struck me. I turned to sonnet eighty-nine and read "Speak of my lameness and I straight will halt."

A lame actor! True Malone, Dowden, and other critics had argued that lameness is used metaphorically. There is a possible chance for such an interpretation of the second quotation, but common-sense rebels against applying it to the first, and even in the second a literal lameness is much more consistently indicated. The context shows that the lameness was a deformity, one of the physical defects which the writer admits in his despair and self-pity.

Other critics explain that it was probably a slight, a barely perceptible lameness, and that Shakespeare was probably cast for old men and other slow-moving characters. But the records give him as a *principal* actor, and his brother Gilbert remembered him as the Ghost in *Hamlet*. I pictured to myself the original production. I imagined the actor saying, "See! It stalks away!" and then seeing a lame ghost *hobble* across the stage. Is it possible, I asked myself, that the author would permit his scene to be broken up by the absurdity of a limping specter?

I looked at the sonnets again. The writer insists that he is "bated and chopped with tann'd antiquity" (Sonnet LXII). But we know from the contemporary allusions of Meres and from other undeniable evidence that the sonnets were written while Shakespeare was in his thirties, perhaps before. Surely this is not at "the twilight of such day as after sunset fadeth in the west" (Sonnet LXXIII). And these inconsistencies having appeared, others introduced themselves. Why the insistence at one time that the suitor is without artistic skill (XXIX), at another boasting of his

verses (LXXXI)? Why the querulous, senile, unmanly attitude contrasted with the wonderful smoothness, nobility, and power of the poetry? And why finally, why above all, the dedication to Mr. W.H., "the onlie begetter of these ensuing sonnets"? If the young lord who was the sonneteer's rival was William Herbert, earl of Pembroke (and there are many arguments against it), he would still not be the "onlie begetter," for the verses are addressed partly to the woman in the case. And why *Mr.* W.H.? If a cypher or an alias is required, would the publisher fail in the servility which never forsakes the Elizabethan bookseller by robbing his patron of his title? Something is clearly wrong.

Then suddenly came this thought. Have not the commentators in their eagerness to preserve the only ostensible bit of autobiography left by the poet, overlooked the obvious fact that the sonnets were written *by Shakespeare for some one else*—for this senile, lame Mr. W.H., who simply paid the young poet to write love-letters for him in the fashion of the period, exactly as he accuses his rival sonneteer (LXXXVI) of doing?

Now the other enigmas begin to solve themselves. Read the sonnets one by one in this new light and you will see the drama. In Sonnets one to seventy-six inclusive, an old man (LXXII and LXXIII), ugly, poor, friendless, without artistic skill or influence (XXIX) fawns upon a younger one, fulsomely praising his looks and merits and urging him to marry. Why is he so anxious that his friend should wed?

This friend (who like himself is named William, as appears by CXXXV and CXXXVI) has won from him the woman he loves (XLII), and although young Will, as we may call him, expresses sorrow (XXXV) for his conduct he continues to keep old Will out of his mistress' favor. Now old Will knows that he is powerless with the usual weapons against so brilliant a rival. To anger young Will can have the effect only of making him indifferent to the wrong he has done and old Will realizes the desperateness of his case. Appeals to young Will's sense of honor then must be the program, united to a very subtle scheme.

Young Will is unmarried. He is rich, powerful, handsome, probably a nobleman (XXXVII). The woman is not beautiful as

the time regards beauty (CXXXI) (CXLI), nor chaste (CXLII). Having been the mistress of this lame, insignificant, old man, she cannot be a woman of young Will's class, so old Will knows that young Will is not likely to marry her and that young Will's marriage to some other woman will put an end to the rivalry and give old Will a chance to come back to favor. Hence the first group of sonnets addressed to young Will.

Old Will, though claiming much for the verses which he has inspired, makes no pretensions to literary skill. He envies young Will's ability in that direction, first in an impersonal manner (XXIX), then directly (LXXXV), and then in a more malicious tone, hinting that young Will, pretending to write his own verses, was really, like himself, aided by another (LXXXVI). But old Will must meet his rival where he can. Young Will sends love poems to the lady (LXXXIII). They may or may not be original. But old Will can, hiring Shakespeare and throwing doubt upon the authorship of young Will's tributes, secure perhaps an advantage.

This he does, and while appealing to young Will through that poetic form of which young Will is himself so fond, he at the same time sends to the woman a series of sonnets, the first accompanying the gift of a notebook or diary (LXXVII).

The first group (I to LXXVI) is a unit by itself. The first twenty-six are ingenious exercises in superlative praise in the artificial Elizabethan manner. The terms of endearment are laid on with a trowel purposely, it seems, to keep the good-will and arouse the remorse of the young rival, while at the same time they subtly suggest to others a reaction from all this sweetness and an impression of effeminacy on the part of the object. The marvelously turned phrases hide all but the obvious motive, but watchfulness will discover the other two in every line.

Then in XXVII we get a suggestion of complaint which deepens in each succeeding section until XXXV. The accusation, though made in terms of painful tenderness or whining timidity, is perfectly clear—young Will has robbed old Will of his mistress. Then something happens. The verses suddenly break into a weak and agitated sonnet (XXXVI), the last two lines of which are copied from another (XCVI) addressed to the woman. Then they burst

into louder laments and clearer reproaches to XLII. With XLIII and the following sonnets we perceive that old Will has gone away from young Will and his mistress, gone somewhere. We find out the reason at the end of LVIII.

I am to wait, though waiting so be hell,
Not blame your pleasure, be it ill or well.

Old Will has been induced by young Will's promise to go away for a while, perhaps on the representation that young Will is repentant (XXXV), and will try to undo the mischief he has brought if old Will promises not to interfere by his continuous appeals and complaints. Old Will believes, also, that absence will raise something like jealousy in the woman (CIX). So Will, the elder, goes to the country and waits. He grows tired of waiting (LXIV, LXVI) interspersing the expression of his impatience with more extravagant praise of his rival (LXIII, LXV to LXIX). He hints that people tell him that the affair is not being broken off (LXX); grows melancholy and hopeless (LXXI, LXXV), reminding young Will that there is not much time left for him to enjoy the reward he has been promised.

In the meantime he has been writing and sending sonnets to the woman. They begin with LXXVII and run on in a strange mixture of adoration and detraction as if he feared the lady would think herself too good for him. He is afraid to attack the younger lover, hoping still that the prize may be turned over to himself. Still he gradually allows a bitter note and a sarcastic tone to slip in (LXXXVI), and as hope fades away his honeyed praise of her changes to peevish scolding (LXXXVIII, LXXXIX, XC). More sarcasm (XCI) and more scolding (XCII to XCVII) and the same fear of approaching death (XCII), and then a softer, tenderer, more genuine set of spring memories (XCVII to XCIX).

Then another shift of the course. He invokes his muse to sing again the praise of the noble youth who has evidently done something which pleased the venerable Pantaloon very much. What can it be except that he has left the woman and gone to other fields, leaving her to be wooed back to her original swain? From C to CVIII he sings his gratitude to his "sweet boy" (CVIII).

With CIX he addresses the woman again. He announces his return. He promises that his appetite he never more will grind "on newer proof to try an older friend" (CX). It thus appears that his exile was for the purpose (the double-edged humor of young Will's advice is seen) of making the woman jealous. But though he directs his verse at her in confident style (CIX to CXV), she admits impediments and principally his age, for he answers these objections in one of the finest of all the sonnets (CXVI) and protests that his love has not changed (CXVI to CXXIV). One suspects that to get rid of him she affects to believe that during his absence he has been false to her.

Then another catastrophe happens. Young Will again appears on the scene and the intrigue shows signs of being renewed. Old Will half-heartedly sends another warning that young Will had better marry before he grows too old (CXXVI), and then resumes his sour sweet epistles to the darkly fair beauty (CXXVII to CXXXII). But alas! The nobleman is soon firmly reintrenched in Love's stronghold, and nothing is left for the Pantaloon but to beg for the dregs of her affection (CXXXIII to CLII) and peevishly upbraid her until at last (CLII) he impotently relinquishes her altogether.

The last two sonnets are obviously not connected with the drama—mere fanciful conceits, stuck on, probably, so that the collection may be complete.

We may now read the dedication and realize that "the only begetter of these insuing sonnets Mr. W. H." is old Will, the man who ordered and paid for them and perhaps can still be induced to pay something toward the perpetuation of his romance—not Lord W. H. nor Lord H. W. nor any lord, but a plain bourgeois commoner as we expect to find him.

But no more of identity. And nothing of the Herbert-Fitton or the Southampton or Sidney Lee's literary exercise, or any other theory. This is not a synthesis, nor a stretching of the poems to fit over some specific external fact. It is merely the bare statement of what appears from the internal evidence to one whose profession it is to discover from the verbal expression of others the facts of their lives and experience in a given case.

This is the story seen by the light of the first premise. That it robs us of what we thought was an autobiographical record is not

really deplorable, for it also erases the stains upon Shakespeare's character as established by the pure moral tone of the plays—stains of sycophancy, of querulousness, even of homo-sexuality. True, the theory here presented, if correct, indicates that Shakespeare in a mercenary spirit was satisfied to cater to the senile and caddish desires of a weak old man, but the consistent financial purpose is no novelty in the estimate of his qualities.

A real loss is the reduction of the sonnets from genuine expressions of feeling to mere hack writing; still we have left to us the marvelous phrases, the profound generalizations, and occasionally a burst of emotion which we feel must be real and personal and oblivious of the mercenary task.

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